

## COVID-19 Check-In

Dr. Deborah Bergeron: Hello, Head Start. It's been a long time. I'm coming to you from my home to your home. I'm sure we've been home, working from home for about four weeks now. You've probably been in a similar situation, and it, it has been tough to think about what my next blog should be in the middle of all of this.

So, I just decided that the best, topic would just be to reach out to you. And, to talk a little bit about what's going on. And, we're going to start with our love note though—we always do. And this month's love note goes to the entire Head Start team, all of our Office of Head Start, both at central office and throughout the regions. It has been so impressive to work with people who are so dedicated.

And, even in this remote environment, I feel like we're getting more done than ever. And, as you know, we've got our regular work to do 'cause we want to make sure that next year is in good shape. But we've also got current work to do to make sure you get support for what's going on right now. So, I wanna thank all of them and I hope you're feeling that. I hope you're seeing the regions as responsive and really plugged in. I certainly am.

So, I just thought I'd do a COVID check-in. I want to thank all of you for all you're doing to support your children and families through this. I know that, remote touch in what we do, both working with young children and with families who are struggling, is not ideal. I think if we're honest, we could say that, right? Except that it's better than nothing.

So, I have so appreciated seeing all of the really cool things that folks are doing online. All of you who tag me in your tweets—OHS\_director. So, if you're tweeting, make sure you do that. And I've seen videos of teachers reading. I saw a teacher who turned her home office into the same look as her classroom if the kids were in her classroom to give them that familiarity, which I thought was really neat. I saw a teacher go by a student's, a child's home and just wave, just to say hello. So many things and lots of parents reading to their kids and doing science and math and just those connections. It's really been heartening to see.

I also wanna make sure I'm reminding you to take care of you through all of this. We've been very mindful to make sure our parents and their children are taken care of, but we need to remember, we are people too. And this affects us too. And, it can't, we can't go without doing some self-checks and make sure that you're taking care of yourself.

I know personally, and I think most of the folks in the Office of Head Start, would probably agree the workload has actually been a longer day. Even though we don't have a commute, I feel like I'm working longer days, more intensely and frankly, as appreciative as I am of technology, I am tired of looking at a screen, and I want to look at people and I'm sure you feel the same way. So, make sure you're taking care of yourself.

And I thought, you know, in the spirit of keeping that Early Head Start theme going, as I promised I would do, I thought I'd talk about Early Head Start specifically here, just because, you know, the remote kind of touch with young children is really tough. But it's doable, right?

You can, you can send a video of you reading to a child and they'll listen to it and get a lot out of it. But, you don't really do that with babies.

So, what are we doing about, our Early Head Start programs and what are some things you can do? I would say that similar to the work that we do with 4s and 5s, birth to 3—I'd say you're still looking for a really flexible approach. You want to make sure you're supporting positive relationships, which I'm sure you're doing. I think most important right now is the notion that families know we're here. Just having that connection and knowing that we haven't forgotten about them, to me is one of the most important things.

I actually saw a post from a teacher, I mean from a parent to public school teachers and it basically said, "you know, I really don't care what's going on academically. What I care about is that my child knows that you're still there, and you still care about them." And I thought that was really important coming from a parent of an, she, I think she had an elementary school child, a high school child, and a young college child. And even for that college child to be plugged into the teachers. To be reminded that they mattered, and they knew someone was out there thinking about them was important. And if it's important for those kiddos, it's really important for our children. So, that positive relationship support is just so important.

And, you know, Early Head Start has the mission to foster the parent-child relationship and this is such a good opportunity to reach out to parents and help them know what to do in a situation where they might just be at home all day in a small space with an infant without a whole lot of break time. And for our single parents in particular who don't have that shared parenting going on might be extra difficult.

And, making sure that they're, you know, keeping a safe environment and that that parent-child relationship is being fostered on a regular basis, and there are little things that parents can do. You guys know this and reminding them of those things. It doesn't have to be anything too complicated.

You know the other thing that Early Head Start does that I think everybody could learn from is—particularly from our home visitors—they're really good at figuring out what to do with everyday things that we keep at home, everyday materials. That's sort of what we're relying on now, so we can look at what our home visitors do and remind parents what they can do at home just with the stuff that they have in their drawers or their cupboards. Right now. No need to go out and get other things. Learning is something that happens through experience more than it happens through the stuff we have.

You know, and the other thing is, during these times of uncertainty, keeping things really simple helps. Keeping the lesson simple, keeping the conversation simple. Staying away from things that are too complex helps to keep things even. Everything going on is pretty complicated. We can make this time that they spend with their children manageable. You know, checking in with, with parents, via phone, email, text, whatever your mechanism is to me is really important.

I said that at the beginning. I think it's important for all of our parents—particularly our Early Head Start parents—they need to know, that we understand it's challenging, and you want to listen for those hints that things might be tougher than usual. And maybe there are other resources you can connect your parents with at this time, if they need that. There might be a

food related needs or medical related needs, or if you get a sense that there's any abuse going on or something like that, there are resources out there and we just want to be on the lookout for those things.

You know, you want to help parents think of ways to spend time with their children as they go about their regular day. And a lot of our parents might be working from home like I am. I don't have young, young children. If I did, I'd have to make sure I had some kind of mechanism in place to manage my day. And maybe you can help them with that organization. And, thinking about the simple things in the cleaning the dishes and you're singing, when you're storytelling, while you're folding the laundry, those kinds of things where it doesn't have to feel like everything needs to stop.

You know, even for our youngest children, it's important that parents stay as calm as possible. Even our babies, they can feel the anxiety vibe. I think we all know that. So, keeping the home calm and peaceful as much as we can in this environment where we all feel a little nervous is an important thing.

Using routines is another big part of this. And you know, if you're at home day after day after day, it's really easy to get out of routine. I know that I have in particular made sure that I try to get up at generally, the same time as I was, so that I don't feel like the day just gets shorter and shorter. I'm making sure that I have a routine in the morning and helping parents to keep those things in somewhat, some semblance of order. The children will feel that order and that's a more calming kind of environment for them to be in.

And it's hard when there isn't anybody. You're not getting in a car and going to an office or getting kids dressed and ready for school. It's really easy to kind of fall back on just sort of hanging out and then days turn into nights and nights turn into days and it all gets sorta discombobulated. And while it might feel fun at first, long-term, that's probably not a very healthy way to be. And it probably is long-term going to have a tough impact on our parents too.

I think it's also worth just letting them know it's okay if some of the things that the children were, some of the skills they were progressing start to regress. Maybe a child was just about potty trained and they took a giant step backward. Even things like literacy development and those kinds of things might slip and not to see that as really a step backward, as much as just a coping mechanism for what's going on. And the best recipe for that is comfort and love and support and not getting too worked up about it.

It'll all come together, and you know, we know from previous disasters that Early Head Start and Head Start are often the lifeline in the community, and we've been working really hard to try to see where Head Start can be a support. Families really appreciate when they hear from the programs. And I know Head Start is the first in line to say, what can we do to help? So, we really do appreciate all that you're doing to do that. And, hearing those stories of our food deliveries and supports around academics and supports for parents and reminding them that you're still there for them, and when the dust settles, you'll still be there for their children.

As you know, we've got a lot brewing for the summer and we'll continue to work along the expectation that we'll be able to be open. We don't know for sure, but regardless, we're still gonna be here for our families, and that's something that we will continue to do.

And you know, here's my in case you didn't know: If you didn't already know, we've got some social media messaging, at the local level that messages that offer parents simple ideas, feel good messages, things you could be sending out if you have a Facebook page or a Twitter or something like that. And I'm going to leave that link here for you so that you can tap into it. Hopefully, that's a resource that helps.

And remember, Head Start is still access to the American dream even during a crisis like this. Go make dreams happen.